

Testimony of Touch

By

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Author Carrie Swim

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the department of Visual Fine Arts and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Painting.

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The Thesis Committee for Carrie Swim  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Testimony of Touch

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Chairperson Judith McCrea

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## **Abstract**

*The Testimony of Touch* is an MFA thesis of painting displayed in the Art and Design Gallery of University of Kansas. It consists of eight panels that measure eight by thirty-one feet long, hanging horizontally on the gallery wall. It wrestles with the problem of processing grief, healing, and desire and adoration of truth through authentic mark making in the movement of paint combined with performative dance.

The method of painting reflects the tangibility of the healing process. I use my body, covered only with paint, to begin the dance in exploration of the vulnerability of the state of grieving. This establishes the composition. Erratic placements of forms are used to reflect the unpredictable rhythm of healing. Traditional methods of mixing oil paint cover raw marks and embrace contemporary image making through ethereal abstract movements of color and stroke. Removal of formulaic marks maintains sincerity. Tones, layered by methods of glazing, create entrance into atmospheric space and into the meaning of forms through its placement and reference to colors of growth and corruption. The spacing between the panels and forms gives pause for the visual journey across the piece. The difficulty of dealing with the size and content of the work gave further tangibility to grief still lingering in an atmosphere of hope.

The painting resulted in the honor and investigation of the divine hand in healing found in the earthly realm. Testimonial organic movements of form, ethereal line, and color flowing in and out of space uncover new revelations of grief and healing. Life's truth and mystery revealed in its absence and presence unbridles the dance and the paint to abstract forms.

The thesis work celebrates the authentic discovery, the adoration, and the integrity of mark making in the passage of healing. This incites future explorations of paint's potential to break off physical limitations of discovering truths desired by humanity. The rhythm of paint and dance will continue to unfold in forthcoming projects.

*The Testimony of Touch* is a painting that explores the complexity of grief and healing through the nature of paint in the abstraction of form, dimensions of color, and movement of dance. The concept of the sublime is critical to this new work in uncovering the connection between spirituality and nature through a mysterious necessity to enhance life. Guided linear marks made by paint-dipped flesh began the Testimony of Touch as painted forms eventually flowed into open spaces. The panels began as one continuous unit where forms only paused within the subtle line made by the edge of each frame. Ultimately, small spaces between the panels were needed to provide structure and incremental breaks in organic imagery. The finished painting is made up of eight panels, each measuring approximately eight feet high by four feet wide. Like a rib cage, these components of various widths expanded and contracted to mirror the movement of lungs, an allusion to breathing that testifies to the journey of “being” rather than an abstract idea. The complexity of abstracted form, ethereal line, and tone, grapples with the reality that hope can take tangible form in the source of life. The physicality of the painting process, itself, addresses the way healing moves through the divine and facilitates adoration and exploration.

As I moved through space, I continually came back to the surface of the painting to record marks made during moments of authenticity. Dance established a rhythm of grieving and healing. Objects broke apart releasing new forms that shifted and collided within the painting. Forms unfolded and congealed back together to encourage the viewer to find meaning. In this way, abstraction embodied a tangible expression of healing

When each mark embraced the canvas, the overall composition could not be seen. However, these marks ultimately produced a relationship between visual experience and movement. The guidance of a spiritual dialog with God birthed moments of truth. Some moments embraced an awkward unexpected juxtaposition and spacing mirroring the unpredictability of life. The fifth panel is a prime example of this. A more geometric composition of bones rests above a void filled with a flow of vaporous forms. As a result, the abstracted yet recognizable bones take unexpected precedence in atmospheric space. This area touches a poignant reality, where destruction of symbols of death and physical entrapment reveal that life may be everlasting.

Three key artists and excerpts from scripture have influenced my desire to create with authenticity. The work of Bruce Herman embraced what he called the “absence of things passing” as he destroyed life-like rendered forms for the sake of finding and displaying the essence of form. Likewise, Kandinsky stated, “in a painting when a line is freed from delineating a thing and functions as a thing in itself its inner sound is not weakened by minor functions, and it receives its full inner power.” Makoto Fujimura, a painter in New York City, abstracts form in response to Holy Scriptures through a traditional Japanese process of painting called, Nihonga. Fujimura stated in his book, River Grace, the truth revealed by history and “the extravagance of God”.

The testimony of my recent large painting rests in the specific journey of healing in my life that I often found in connections to truth and removal of substance that revealed the design of the healer. Thus, I continually removed and re-created forms with colors that

imply meaning through a process that, like healing itself, must be unraveled.

Impressionists, German expressionists, and American scene painters also desired to bring the audience into a field of contemplated reality of theory, experience, or emotion. Expressionism extrapolated extreme emotion into an experience with paint through aggressive and or tender mark making. The Impressionist, Claude Monet, displays a living spirit pulsating throughout his large nature-based paintings. American scene painters like the Hudson River painters focused and unraveled the beauty and terror of nature in large paintings that occupied the senses, particularly the center and peripheral vision of the eye. While developing *Testimony of Touch*, extreme movement deconstructed conscious forms so that newly emerged symbols that served as a common thread from art history while providing a doorway into hidden meaning. Within the work, a sense of the sublime ultimately exists as the essential relationship between what evokes terror and adoration.

Color and form operate as key components of visual movement in the composition of *Testimony of Touch* while the voice of the sublime whispers an abundant unbroken beauty. The eye is encouraged to explore while forging, delicate emotional connections and spatial comprehension. Color holds visual interest while referring to growth, decay, and extravagance. One pigment is applied throughout the piece through large strokes and delicate notations before moving to the next color. Warm, reddish gray colors distort traditional renderings of cloud-like formations. A dark blue form that resembles a horse and abstract marks of sudden yellow and pinks, excite the space with light and mystery.

Vibrant reds seem to evoke both fear and attraction in the second and third panels. Traditionally, red symbolized royalty, blood, sacrifice of Christ, panic in nature, or happiness in Asian culture, the typical color of an Asian wedding dress. In the second panel, flesh tones converge and unfold like a garment above flowing tones of blood-like red. Areas of high contrast and rich color speak of the relationship between terror and safety, seen throughout baroque and romantic paintings. In the transition between the second and third panels, blood flows into water breaking at the panel's edge where it continues into the fourth panel to lift figurative forms of light. These light areas move away from darker forms to embody joy.

Change in the orientation and position of the panels provided unexpected yet needed conversations of color. One day, after flipping a panel upside down, the warmth of green suddenly brought life into a cold cluster of abstracted bones. Blue continually flowed into more open spaces expressing surprise, peace, and refinement. Lighter colors of white, teals, and pinks created open atmospheric space. Fujimura explains that space can be a place of grace. In his book, River Grace, he states, "Grace, it shall be grace that exists between the immanent reality of earth and the transcendent reality of heaven." The seventh panel, once residing as the sixth, always mandated minimal touch. In its revised position, this panel provided a literal break in form and sufficient space to infer figurative forms of dense color.

The large size of this painting allowed my body to reach, climb, and stretch into movement necessary for discovery and expression. The scale of *The Testimony of Touch*

set the stage for a dialog with the weight of a divine hand and redemptive beauty. Each of the eight vertical panels alludes to ascension and a communication between the being of heaven and earth. Yet a horizontal more earthbound orientation occurred when the panels are viewed closer together. This format brought the divine nature of encounter into an earthly relevant experience.

The intention of *The Testimony of Touch* is to manifest truth through the integrity of abstraction and the connections among forms in space. The abstraction of this thesis project embodies a tangible expression of healing. During the painting process, my body and spirit embraced the physicality of paint.



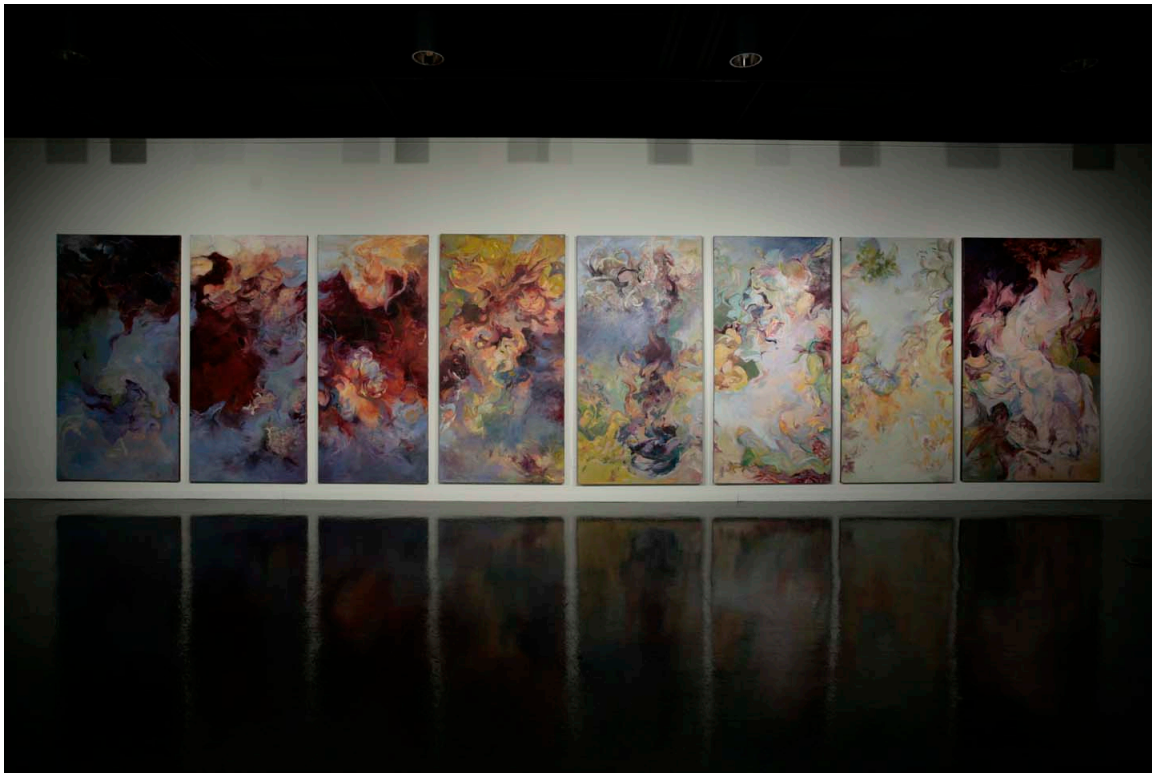


Figure 1

Carrie Swim, *Testimony of Touch*. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Approximately 8x31".  
Temporary Showing in Art and Design Building, Lawrence, Kansas.



Figure 2

Carrie Swim. *The Testimony of Touch*. The fifth panel detail.



Figure 3

Carrie Swim. *The Testimony of Touch*. Detail of panel five.





Figure 4

Carrie Swim. *The Testimony of Touch*. First Panel detail.



Figure 5

Carrie Swim. *Testimony of Touch*. Panel two detail.



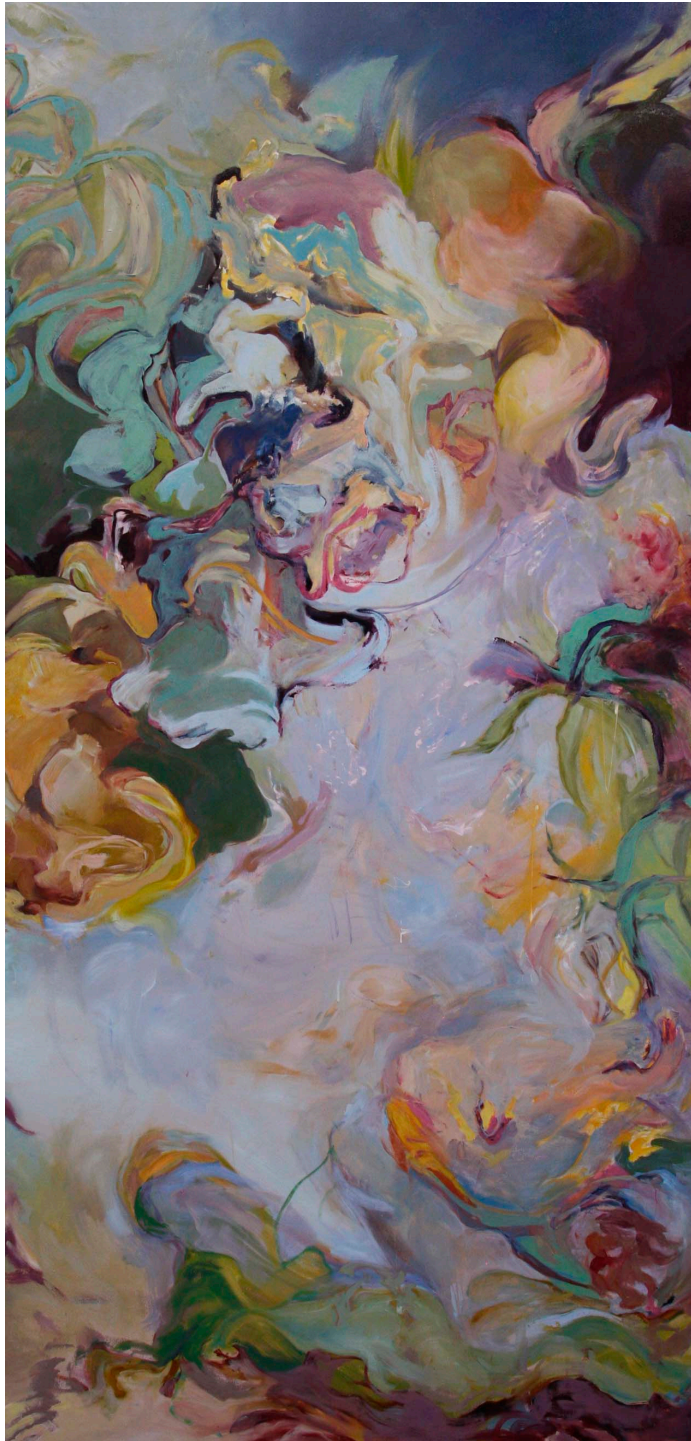


Figure 6

Carrie Swim. *Testimony of Touch*. Panel six detail.



Figure 7

Carrie Swim. *Testimony of Touch*. Panel three detail.





Figure 8

Carrie Swim. *Testimony of Touch*. Detail of panel three.





Figure 9

Carrie Swim. *Testimony of Touch*. Panel eight detail.

## Works Cited

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